July 2014

"The Risk of the Real"

Millicent Dillon

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol55/iss1/30

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IT IS A PROPOSITION generally accepted by readers and writers alike that fiction is not fact. We know that happenings in stories and novels are not real, that the plots are not real, that the characters are not real (though the places may be real). Yet our obligation is to what Coleridge called "the suspension of disbelief," a process that has more to do with the "as if" than the "if."

But then—how did it come about?—there came a day when obligation assumed a new aspect for me. I found myself being led to take story right up to the very edge, to work on the knife edge between the real and the not-real. Perhaps it was a self-appointed test of some sort, a way of pitting the imagination against the real. Or perhaps it was a way of succumbing to the real, while insisting I was only—only?—imagining.

No matter the reason, this time, for this novel, I was going to imagine the real, the life of a real man, a real spy who died thirty years ago. I told myself that though I could make changes in the real, yet the story would be held intact by the shape of the real life. To do this, I assured myself, would be an extra protection, like donning a double layer of clothing.

And at the end, when it was all done, I would be brought safely to ground in the real world with a real ending. (For I am often uneasy about endings.)

As it turned out, I was wrong.

When I came out of the subway into the night it was raining, a light rain accompanied by an unusually dense mist. I went east at first, and then north, or so I thought, but as I did not know my way around the Village, I soon grew confused. And when I found myself at an intersection between two numbered streets, streets that should have been parallel, I knew I was lost.

I stopped a woman hurrying by under a red umbrella, who said all I needed to do was go right one block, left two blocks, right one
more block, and I'd be there. Indeed, it was just as she told me. In a few moments there were the lights of the bookstore penetrating the mist like a beacon.

"Too bad about the weather," said the manager, a young woman with a harried air. "Let's wait a little while and see if more people come."

After fifteen minutes went by, and it was clear that no one else was coming, she got up and introduced me. From the lectern I surveyed the audience of eight sprinkled among empty chairs. Perhaps, I thought, this was the time to make a statement, to say that in this book I was attempting to imagine the real. But, no, I decided not to do that.

Instead I simply began to read, beginning at the beginning: My narrator, an "I," imagines Harry in the subway, going under the East River from Queens to Manhattan. He is coming to the midpoint of the tunnel; there is a strange sound, a hum, a roaring, a pressure in his ears. At Grand Central he leaves the subway and boards a train, gets off the train, and gets on another train to insure that he is not being followed.

At the end of this section I stopped and looked up from the book. In fact, I said, I had once, many years before, met the real Harry, in real life: I was going down a corridor and he was coming toward me, an ordinary man for all intents and purposes. (This was before anyone knew he was a spy.) I saw him for an instant only, but in that instant of passing him by, some strangeness in him had seized on some secret strangeness in me, and had reappeared, changed, how could it not be changed after so many years, in the Harry of my book.

Before my eyes the eight in the audience were suddenly more alert. I could see it in the way they leaned forward, individually and collectively. It gave me pause, even made me a little uneasy. It was as if the real Harry was suddenly gaining plausibility at the expense of the fictional Harry. I had no one to blame but myself for this. By introducing my own experience of seeing him in the flesh, I had enacted a kind of betrayal, of the imagination itself, perhaps. No, I assured myself, this is just one of those things that happens when you insist on clinging to the knife edge between the real and the fictional. Why call it betrayal?

As I went on to read another scene, an invented scene with invented dialogue (though, I reminded myself, based on fact), I could feel my audience falling easily into belief in the narrative, as if the link to the real was a kind of insurance against risk for them
as well. And I thought again, as I often have thought before, that there is unforeseen risk in following any tale, in believing any tale, real or imagined.

After twenty minutes, I closed the book, and the manager said I would now take questions.

A man in the front row spoke up immediately, as if he’d been champing at the bit. “When you wrote this book,” he said with obvious irritation, “how could you not think of the political ramifications of what you were writing? You couldn’t possibly have been so naive as to think you could write about Harry Gold’s spying for the Russians and not talk about all that happened with the Rosenberg case and how he was a witness in the trial of the Rosenbergs—”

“I did write about that.”

“Yes, but you didn’t go into the political implications. . . .”

“Remember that this is a novel, it’s not a political work . . . .”

“Everything is political,” he said severely.

“When I moved to the Village thirty years ago,” a gray-haired woman in the third row rushed in, “people’s feelings about all those things that happened in the Fifties were still very strong. There were violent arguments about the Rosenberg case, and about the Hiss case. Some people defended their innocence, some people thought they were guilty. I remember I used to go to a cafe and have coffee, and a woman used to come in and sit by herself. It turned out that it was Priscilla Hiss. Everyone said to me, If you do talk to her, be careful not to say anything about her husband Alger.”

I was grateful to her for this distraction. At the same time, thinking of what the irritable man had said, I could not help recalling the very day, the very hour the Rosenbergs were executed. It was a hot day... I was on a bus in New York....

A tall thin man, seated in the back, said, “I don’t understand. Books are either fact or fiction. It’s hard to make sense of them if they’re neither one nor the other.”

“Well, actually,” the manager intervened, “a number of writers are doing that now. For example, Joyce Carol Oates—”

“I don’t much care for what a lot of writers are doing. I think that’s because everyone’s so mixed up, with reality TV and things like that. Their brains are softened. And what I especially don’t like are biographies that suddenly turn into fiction like that man—what’s his name—who wrote the Reagan book....”
A young woman in the back interrupted. "How accurate are your facts? Did you do research for this book as you would on a biography?"

"Yes, I did, I examined the FBI files to make sure I had the crucial facts correct."

"But still this is not a biography."

"No, it's a novel."

"It's an interference in history, that's what it is," said the man in the first row.

An interference in history? How could that be that I—this single being—could interfere in history? All the same, I found myself stumbling over the question of what was the real reason I had done what I did. I had been so certain before about my obligation to be on a knife edge between the real and the imagined. But now—I looked at the empty chairs and I heard the plaintive cry of doubt.

"History is about what was; this is about what was not," I said. Even as I said it, I was not sure it was true. (How odd and strange one is to oneself when one is in front of an audience—or perhaps I should say I, not one—how you have moved and are at a distance from yourself, how your thoughts ebb and flow in response to what is not quite you and not quite them.)

I tried to take hold. "In fiction you can use facts but you are not obliged to adhere to the facts. Something else rules."

"Like what?" someone said.

"Like the character or characters, like the story, like the shape of the story...."

(And what is the shape of this story that could just have well started out as an essay, and maybe it did? But despite that, something in it is wanting to go forward as story. It feels as if it is wanting to go to a hum, to end in a hum. And how can an essay end in a hum?)

As I was signing the remaining stock of my book for the manager—only four books had been sold, I noticed a man hovering in the background, moving from one unoccupied seat to another. When I finished with the last book, I glanced up and saw him standing in front of me. A tall man with a trim white beard, he was wearing a tan raincoat.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw the title of the book in the window," he said in a deep, resonant voice. "HARRY GOLD. It
can't be the same Harry Gold I knew, I said to myself. But then, I came in and looked through the pages and I saw that it was the same Harry Gold."

"You knew Harry?"

"Sure, I knew Harry. I knew him at Lewisburg. I didn't know him well. He was always working in the lab."

"At Lewisburg?" At Lewisburg, the federal penitentiary, where Harry had served his sentence so many years ago—what was this man, this man who was so dignified looking, doing there? Was he the warden?

"Why where you—?" I started, and then changed it to "What did you—"

"I was a bank robber."

"Ah," I said.

"I was there for twelve years. I didn't know Harry very well. He was always working in the lab but I knew him. I knew them all during my time there. Harry, David Greenglass, Alger Hiss, Wilhelm Reich…"

"Wilhelm Reich—"

"He was the man who had a theory about orgone energy—"

"Yes, I—"

"—that it was in the air, and you could absorb the energy from the air if you got into one of his orgone boxes. He was there for two years. The day before he was supposed to be released, he didn't show up for roll call. They shut down the whole prison looking for him. Finally they found him, in his cell. He'd died in his sleep. He was completely dressed except for his shoes."

"I see," I said, but I didn't see, or rather I couldn't tell, was this true, was this not true what he was telling me? He spoke with such easy assurance, how could I doubt him, and yet it was the very fact of the easy assurance that made me uneasy. I'd never met a bank robber, had never even thought about meeting one, but if I had thought about it, I certainly wouldn't have expected that he would admit it right off without shame, maybe even with a little pride.

I actually would have liked to ask him what banks he had robbed, and how he'd gotten caught, but it seemed somehow inappropriate at this time, in this bookstore. Instead I said, "I heard this story about David Greenglass, that he used to get very upset—in fact, he had a tantrum when he couldn't get the salami that he wanted…"
“That’s a lot of baloney. I was on the same diet line as he was. That never happened.”

With these words he opened the book that lay before him, the book about Harry, leafed through it, and then slowly shut the cover. “I never read fiction, myself,” he said.

Making my way back to the subway, I was intent on not getting lost again, on steering clear of that place where two streets that should have been parallel intersected. At the subway I hurried down the steps to the platform, and found a train waiting. I entered just as the doors were closing and took a seat in the uncrowded car. I noticed how clean the car was, and free of graffiti, except for some desperate scratches on the window glass.

At the same time I kept having the weird feeling that what I had been doing from the moment I came out of the bookstore was not exactly happening to me, or rather that I was going through it but not in the usual sense of going through something that happens to you, but that I was only partially penetrating it somehow, and couldn’t get past it. It was as if I was in a strange intermediate state, not doing what I was doing even as I did it—sitting, looking—but of course I knew it was happening, that I was doing these things.…

I assured myself, and I accepted the assurance, that I was having some bizarre reaction to the reading. When you get right down to it, readings seem normal but actually they are not normal at all. There you are, for a long time before the reading, being one kind of being, holed up alone in a room, with words appearing, chosen, dismissed, chosen, same words, new words, old words, and then—after all that other stuff, which seemed to have vanished, having to do with the actual publishing—this moment comes when you go out into the world to do a reading.…

Why? To sell a few books, a very few books, four books.…

And when you begin to read to others those very words you’d written when you were alone, you are supposed to be sharing, but isn’t it also that you have switched sides and now are bearing witness against that lone being you no longer are, almost as though you are a spy against that self?

So I thought and kept on thinking, or rather not really thinking because there was no outcome, only a continuous going round and round, coming back to the same point. And all the time others in the subway car kept going in and out, I saw them going, I kept hearing the voice on the loudspeaker announcing the next stop,
not clearly, not clearly enough, but then suddenly I heard the word “Queens.”

I’d taken the wrong train.

I was not going to the Upper West Side, where I was staying at Phyllis’s apartment. I was going to Queens. At another time I might have been irritated with myself for not having paid attention when I jumped on the train as to whether it was a B or D or E or whatever—but I wasn’t irritated, not even upset, I was still in that strange meditative state, where my attention was riveted somewhere between before and after, between there and here.

As soon as the doors opened at the first stop in Queens, I hurried off the train. I looked at my watch: It was only nine-thirty. Surely it was later than that. It felt as if I’d been riding on that train for hours.

Almost at once, a train appeared on the other side of the platform. Several others were waiting to board it, so I had to wait my turn to get on. I checked over and over, looking repeatedly at the sign showing the train’s destination, even asking the man in front of me, to make sure that it was the right train, the train to Manhattan.

Once inside, I fell into a seat with a sense of relief. To my left a young man and woman were in animated conversation in a language unknown to me. Towards the center of the car, a group of young men were standing, laughing and talking loudly. At the far end a woman sat holding a little boy about three or four on her lap, her right arm encircling him. With her other hand she held a stroller. Wasn’t it late for a child that age to be out?

I noticed that on this car too there were scratches on the glass, graffiti of a new kind, lines crossing and recrossing without design. Behind the scratched glass the gray stone of the subway tunnel rushed by.

It came to me now that in that other train—the wrong train—I had gone under the East River, just as I had imagined Harry doing in my book, but I had gone right past the mid-point of the tunnel without hearing any hum, any roaring, without even thinking of hearing it. Was it there and had I just not heard it? When I wrote the book, I had remembered such a sound, from years ago, traveling in the subway, in that very subway....

I forced myself to listen—as if I was opening my ears—but you can’t close your ears really, so how can you not hear?—to listen to the sounds around me, to the train rushing, to the grinding of wheels on the track, to the car rocking. Surely, we must have
reached the mid-point under the East River by now. I thought of
the water above pressing down on the tunnel with such weight,
how much weight—how deep was the river here?

The young man and woman to my left were still talking but the
noise was so loud I wouldn’t have known what they were saying
even if I knew the language. The group of young men at the center
of the car were still talking and laughing, or I assumed they were
laughing: their mouths were open, their lips were pulled taut, they
were nudging each other. I stared at the woman with the small
child, who was now asleep, being carried in a dream through a
tunnel filled with sound.

I thought of a dead man in a dark cell, lying on his cot, fully
dressed, his shoes off. How did that happen? Maybe he was
dressed, except for his shoes, which he put on last. Maybe he had
just leaned down to tie his shoes and that made him feel suddenly
queasy. Maybe he decided to lie down for a second, and then....

I am not going to think about this, I thought...I am going to
think of getting off the train and transferring to the right train that
will take me to the Upper West Side...I am going to think about
getting off at the station near Phyllis’s. The rain will be falling, it
will be misty—it will be more like San Francisco than New York....

But when I did get off the train and went out into the street, the
rain had stopped. The smell was a New York smell, not a San
Francisco smell. Something about the ozone—something about the
sidewalks—something about the rate at which moisture is absorbed....

I started walking west. I passed the bank on the corner. It was
closed but the lobby was open. A woman was putting a card in the
outside slot and gaining admittance. I too needed cash, I was
almost out of money, should I stop and get it now? Would my bank
card work? I went to the door of the bank, I saw the sign, warning
about people loitering—

If that bank robber was a bank robber now, would he be one of
those loitering around cash machines? Or maybe he wouldn’t be a
bank robber now. Maybe he was only a bank robber because of the
times. What banks had he robbed then and how many, and what
happened to him after he got out of jail? What had made him
change? Surely he had to have changed. A bank robber who was
still a bank robber would hardly bother coming to a book reading.

I put my card in the slot. It worked. I went into the lobby and put
my card in the machine. I punched in sixty dollars when the
question came up about the amount of cash I wanted. Damn it, I thought, after I’d taken the money, this isn’t my bank and now I’ll have to pay a fee for using this bank, and another fee from my bank for using this bank, I should have taken more, at least it wouldn’t be such a high percentage of the amount of cash I got.

As I walked the last block to Phyllis’s building, I felt an increasing irritation—in my gut and in my chest. Was it about the money? What difference did a few dollars make? Maybe it was just the principle of the thing, being charged twice for getting your own money. No, it wasn’t money or principle. It was something else, something I couldn’t put my finger on.

A man passed by: he looked a little like Harry. I stopped. I thought of leaning against a wall. I was not dizzy but I needed the reassurance of solidity. It suddenly came to me that the imagined was coming closer to the real, the distance becoming so small, from here to there, narrowing....

It was only a few more yards to Phyllis’s building. I opened the door to the building. I went into the lobby, in which there were new pink walls and new gray chairs. The management had charged the tenants a rent hike for the improvements, Phyllis had told me. I pushed the button to summon the elevator from the basement to the lobby. I waited for the sound of its coming, as if it was an overlay, as if it was, almost, a melding.

I was remembering the time I was six and was going up in an elevator with my brother who was a year older. The elevator stopped between floors. The door opened. There before us was a rough stone wall. Just beyond our reach above the wall was the closed door of the floor above. It was in the days when there was no button to push, no emergency signal. We yelled. No one answered. My brother tried climbing up the rough wall. He could not reach the door on the floor above. He tried hoisting me on his shoulders. I could not reach it. We both kept yelling.

I opened the door to 3D with the key Phyllis had given me. She’d been called away, unexpectedly, to Chicago, as her sister-in-law was dying. I passed through the long hallway, which led to the last room on the right, my room when I stayed with her. It had been the office-studio of her late husband, Martin.

Lining the hallway, on both sides, were his paintings. After he retired from teaching, he had done one painting after another of the village in Eastern Europe where he had lived as a child. Many of
the paintings were portraits, almost all of men, many, I realized, of the same man.

So then, I wondered, are there images of others that enter into us and stay and find their place in us, in all of us, whether they are images that come from many encounters, or from just one encounter?

I went into the room. I put my things on the desk. I looked around the cluttered room, at Martin’s books, Martin’s things. At that moment I thought of something I had seen in Harry’s FBI file. In the midst of an interrogation the agent said, There is a young woman who is suspected of being part of the spy ring you were involved in. We know nothing about her but her first name. She is called Millie. Is this person Millicent Dillon? the agent asked. No, Harry said. It isn’t her.

After I got into bed, I read for a while in one of Martin’s books—on Scott’s expedition to the Pole. My eyes began to close. I kept thinking of whiteness, of being in cold whiteness. Finally I fell into a sleep so deep it was like falling.

And then, suddenly I was awake. A noise had awakened me, a hum just above the level of hearing, persistent, irritating, it seemed to go on and on. Where was it coming from? I turned on the light. It was a steady noise—electrical? mechanical? There was nothing on in the room, no device.

It seemed to be coming from the wall. I put my ear close to the wall. Yes, it was louder there, a hum, fainter as I drew away, but still audible. After about five minutes, it stopped. I turned off the light. I tried to go to sleep, but I kept waiting for the noise to start up again. After an interval, twenty minutes or so, it began again. It was a continuous unvarying sound but its effect was jarring, like a hammering on my ear drums. I said to myself, It’s only a hum.

I told myself, Get up and go in another room. Go to sleep on the couch in the living room.

I couldn’t get up.

It was as if I had no choice but to stay and listen.

There is false imagining going on here, I said to myself, sharply, more sharply than anyone else could say. False imagining—what is that? the real corrupted? that imagining has gone too far? What is too far? What is not far enough?